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Is the honeymoon over? Children and young people's participation in public decision-making

E. Kay M. Tisdall

Percy-Smith writes:

The honeymoon period for young people's participation and the celebration of their voices has now passed. There is a growing realization that young people's voices alone may not be sufficient to bring about effective and meaningful outcomes. Relatively little attention has been paid to the wider social, organizational and systemic contexts within which young people participate. Similarly, more attention needs to be placed on the effectiveness of participation in conveying the reality of young people's experiences and values, how young people's voices are responded to and what happens when different voices collide. (2006: 172)

This statement has practical implications, for those involved in supporting and promoting children and young people's participation. It suggests that we – both as individuals and in our organisations -- must look beyond the immediacy of our work with children and young people. We must think strategically (using O'Toole and Gale's distinctions, this issue) and move institutions to positions where they include children and young people as stakeholders. We must be tactical, aware of the institutional and wider contexts, other stakeholders' views, communities of place and of interest, and how views fit into the relevant governance or organisational structures. And we would benefit from thinking about our 'work' reflexively, asking hard questions about our own positioning, the position of children and young people's participation, and of children and young people themselves.

The statement also has implications for our theorising of children and young people's participation. The available literature has powerfully promoted their rights to participate, as articulated in the UNCRC, and its incorporation into various policies and laws. Legal theorists and philosophers have debated whether children have rights and if so what kind; leaders in this field have articulated powerful arguments that children indeed have rights and pushed the boundaries beyond protection and provision rights to those of participation. Writers affiliated with the 'sociology of

childhood' have argued for perceiving children as agents (see Hinton, this issue). They have demonstrated how traditional conceptualisations of childhood – and particularly conceptualisations from Northern countries – frequently failed to recognise children's agency and instead placed them solely in passive and dependent positions, requiring protection and provision but certainly not participation. Hart's much-cited participation ladder (see Hinton, this issue, for description) inspired many who wished to promote children and young people's participation, and became a powerful tool in our work. Subsequent typologies (see description of Sher and Lansdown, in Hinton this issue) similarly encouraged individuals and organisations to reflect on the ways in which adults facilitated – or more often acted as barriers to – children and young people's participation.

But the 'honeymoon' of such theoretical advocacy of children and young people's participation has also passed. These theorisations, while still powerful and still useful, do not provide sufficient substance to understand, analyse and critique children and young people's participation as it has developed. As such, these theorisations cannot assist policy and practice in addressing the current tensions and assist in moving such participation forward. It is time for theorisations of children and young people's participation to look more widely. Just as practice may be too child-focussed (see Morrow, 2005; Hart, this issue), theorisations of children and young people's participation have been too child-focussed as well. Other disciplines and theoretical areas have been struggling with how to understand community development, globalisation, changes in governance and the relationships between individuals, communities and the state. These areas have infrequently considered children and young people, as even relevant let alone a potentially illuminating 'test case'. But equally, childhood studies and theorisations of children and young people's participation in particular may have much to learn from these other areas.

This special issue, and the seminar on which it was based, seeks to develop this theoretical agenda. This conclusion discusses three areas addressed by the articles and explored at the seminar: what is counted – or discounted – as legitimate forms of children and young people's participation; the potential usefulness of theorisations of governance, citizenship and social capital; and how the role of adults ('participation workers') can be understood. This article builds upon the richness of the seminar's discussion and we wish to acknowledge the considerable contributions from the seminar participants (see reference list in Hinton et al., this issue).

Discourses of participation

As discussed in the introduction (see Hinton et al., this issue), we concentrated on children and young people's participation in 'public' decision-making. While this may be distinguishable from participation in more individualised decision-making (i.e. about one's own life and choices), 'public' or collective decision-making can still encompass a wide variety of scales, contexts and issues.

The term 'participation' in the children's field tends to have positive associations, seen as inevitably a 'good thing', something to be promoted, something that should be beneficial to all involved. Such a presentation, unthreatening and inclusive, no doubt has aided its permeation into a host of policy and practice arenas. It creates a contrast with overt politicisation of children, which could be seen as adult manipulation, or unionisation, which could threaten adult workers' roles and benefits. It can fit participation into a variety of government agendas, from citizenship education to consumerism, to responsabilisation¹ to social inclusion. But this Pollyann-ish presentation of children's participation has at least three implications.

First, very different activities can be considered participation. Hart suggested in his seminar contribution a three-fold division in participation work, in international development:

- Compliance: reproduction of outlook and values aligned with particular political agendas
- Realisation: children's self-realisation and the realisation of their rights
- Transformation: achieving transformation of individuals (both adults and children), organisations and society

His presentation preferred the latter, transformation, and found far too many examples of compliance and realisation (see also Theis 2007, for similar view in the context of East and Southeast Asia). 'Realisation' can be achieved even in constrained or oppressed situations, but without a process of socio-political transformation, the outcomes for children and young people may well be frustration. And when children and young people take more control, such as the young

¹ This rather inaccessible term is used to capture two associated policy trends: more generally, the trend to make rights conditional on people carrying out their responsibilities (Lewis 2003); and, more specifically, placing the responsibility for governing anti-social behaviour upon individuals in local communities (Flint 2002).

Palestinians who produce a thriving youth newspaper and television programme, they may find it difficult to keep their project funding (Hart, 2007).

Second, there is a distinct risk that activities are only labelled 'participation' when they fit comfortably into the agendas of the organising adults – and those of funders, policy makers, or governing structures. A determination is made on what *issues* are considered 'public' and, even more pertinent for children and young people's participation, on what *processes* are considered 'public'; there is a determination of what are legitimate issues for discussion (O'Toole and Gale's 'scope of democracy', this issue), and what are the legitimate processes for doing so. But contributions from South Africa (Moses, this issue) and Brazil (Butler, this issue) lead us to ask how children and young people's everyday participation in their communities can be theorised and understood, alongside more organised participation on policy issues, schools and services articulated from India (Rampal, this issue) and the UK (Davis and Farrier, this issue).

Third, there is a growing call from those working on children and young people's participation to acknowledge and consider conflict (e.g. see Morrow, 2005; Percy-Smith, 2006). This may be conflict between children and young people in any one group or, less confrontationally, diversity and differences may need acknowledgement. Yet, there can be pressures on children and young people to present 'the views of children' in general. The impact of their contributions can be undermined if they are seen as 'the usual suspects', professionalised children or 'unrepresentative' (see Sinclair, 2004; Nairn et al., 2006). Taylor and Percy-Smith (this issue) give us a useful reminder that such expectations and criticisms are not unique to children and young people but can also be found in community development. Suppressing internal conflict in order to have one external 'voice' can be an expected and effective tactic to maximise influence. A political science perspective might perceive this as a necessary asset or resource for 'outsiders' to policy networks, whereas close 'insiders' would have more flexibility to put forward different opinions (see Maloney et al., 1994; Tisdall and Davis, 2004).

Sometimes, though, children and young people do have common messages and demands as a group, because they share certain experiences of inclusion and exclusion – at least in part due to the reigning ideas of childhood and associated societal organisation. Conflict may then arise between children and young people's

views and demands, and those of other adults. Seminar participants offer a variety of ways to theorise and work through this.

Percy-Smith advocates the concept of “collaborative social learning”, a concept that is “relational and dialogical”, which can be used “to enhance the quality of participation within and between community groups, in policy development, and in local decision-making processes” (2006: 155). He goes on to say that this approach can address community tensions and can “re-establish a commitment to developing neighbourhoods as inclusive spaces of collective culture rather than conflict” (2006: 155). But is conflict always negative? If channelled, as Percy-Smith reports subsequently in his article, conflicting ideas have the potential to spark off new ones, lead to change, to create opportunities. Acknowledging conflict can actually be part of giving recognition to different people’s views, including children’s and young people’s as well as adults. It is how we collectively deal with conflict, arguably, which is the issue. Ideas raised at the seminar – such as analysing participation as communication (Davis, 2006) and/ or as ‘discursive spaces’ where children and adults co-create knowledge (see Moss, 2006) – provide methods to re-frame conflict, with both acknowledgement and potentially productive ways to transform it.

Relating to Governance and Citizenship

Academic theorisations have burgeoned in the often inter-related theorisations of civil society, governance, and social capital. Writing from a UK context, Arnott (this issue) traces the perceived crisis in social democratic institutions and a desire to recast the relationships between individuals, civil society and the state. These and other pressures have led to a shift from ‘government to governance’. This phrase describes a move from centralised top-down policy-making to a decentralised, less hierarchical policy-making process with a wider array of partnerships and partners (see O’Toole and Gale, this issue). A consensus is growing, writes Gaventa, in both the North and South: a “more active and engaged citizenry” is needed *and* a “more responsive and effective state” (2004: 6). Participation is seen as key to this. It will improve both the quality and legitimacy of government decisions (Barnes et al., 2007); “it has become one of the mechanisms through which the government attempts to govern” (Arnott, this issue). As children and young people have become constructed in policy terms as potential participants (if not always partners), governance has the potential for new processes for children and young people’s views to be heard and to have an impact.

But Arnott's analysis provides several notes of caution. She points to the changing conceptualisations and structuring of the welfare state. Children have long been, and continue to be, a central focus of the welfare state, from service provision to protection of their well-being. Youth, I would add, similarly have been a central but different focus of the welfare state: they are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system and a focus of antisocial behaviour policy; and there are on-going concerns about what they are doing in terms of 'active' engagement with education, employment or volunteering. Thus the trends of the welfare state, from residualism to responsibilisation, from citizenship entitlements to consumerism, have particular impacts on children and young people and their participation. The recasting of the welfare state has not lessened the processes of legitimising some views and not others, and distributing more resources to some and less to others.

Both within and outwith the seminar (e.g. Invernizzi and Milne, 2005; Lister, 2007), children's citizenship is being re-examined. Citizenship is a powerful political term, perhaps particularly in the UK after Thatcherism sought to colonise it in the 1980s but also in other countries (Invernizzi and Milne, 2005). In Hill and Tisdall (1997), we ask whether modifications of the concept of citizenship to incorporate childhood would retain the basic buildings of the concept. Lister (2007) addresses our question, with the answer that the building blocks of citizenship cannot be discarded – but they can be reshaped. The key, she writes, is to stop constructing substantive citizenship as an absolute. Instead, she cites Cohen's idea of 'semi-citizenship', as a middle ground where children are citizens by certain standards and not others.

But while partial or semi-citizenship may well be acceptable both theoretically and politically, it still may undermine children's status rather than enhance it. It underlines that children are not full citizens (see also King, 1997, who argues this in relation to the UNCRC). If citizenship, à la T.H. Marshall, is associated with 'full membership of the community', does partial citizenship equate to partial community membership? A typical childhood studies critique would ask whether adults, who do not meet these certain standards, should also be recognised as partial citizens.

Stalford (2000) provides another answer. She suggests:

... a focus on social (as opposed to political or civil) citizenship for children does not necessarily imply or reinforce a 'partial' status but provides a legitimate expression and enhancement of children's role in society. (121)

Social rights, she states, can be a valid claim to full citizenship and indeed are better at recognising individuals' needs and rights in a given context. If citizenship involves not only status but process, as Lister and colleagues (2003) argue, then a resulting question could be whether the new forms of governance, the networks involved in social capital and civil society, are recognising such social citizenship as valid claims for inclusion – and in what ways. They may do so when children and young people are seen as users of the welfare services, relating back to Arnott's article (this issue). So children and young people are more routinely consulted when there are policy changes to education or social work legislation, or when local authorities plan for children's services. But are they as routinely involved in more contentious, political decisions?

In the UK, the participation of children and young people in 'public' decision-making has been closely aligned with influencing policy and politics at either local or national levels. But a look at participation from other countries reminds us that participation can occur outwith liberal democracies (see special issues of *Children, Youth and Environment* 2006 and 2007). International donors' preference to support civil society, rather than governments which are perceived as weak or corrupt, provides an alternative. But critics (e.g. Maclure and Sotelo, 2004) have pointed out that this side-stepping of formal government structures risks undermining them further. Donor support may bolster civil society but it also risks colonising it. And it fails to consider the weaknesses of participative governance and civil society (see Hart, this issue).

Articles in this issue articulate some of the weaknesses as well as the strengths. Reviewing the literature, contributions from both community development (Taylor and Percy-Smith, this issue) and political sociology (O'Toole and Gale, this issue) note the opportunities to extend democracy to young people. But this extension may co-opt citizens into the state's agenda, particularly with a consumerist agenda focused on improving service delivery. Lines of decision-making accountability become fuzzy and unsure in participative governance (see also Gaventa, 2004). Certain people are seen to possess the skills or experience to participate, who become included, but this also distinguishes others as not having the skills nor experience (see Harris, 2006,

for similar reflections in the Australian and New Zealand contexts). These concerns are very similar to the critiques of social capital expressed by Taylor (2006). While networks have considerable positive potential – conduits of knowledge, agency and power – they are also about closure, and not all can gain access to institutional spaces. Informal groups formed from communities may provide invaluable spaces for a range of people to become engaged, but they can be very fragile and lack the ability to support participation over time (see O’Kane and Karkara, 2007, writing about South and Central Asian contexts). This general finding has particular salience for children and young people’s participation and particularly their more everyday expressions of their views.

Social capital, as developed by Putnam, has become a powerful concept in governments’ policy-making. Its weaknesses have now been well documented, such as its conceptual muddiness, its failures to recognise power and its problematic applications to children (e.g. see Morrow, 2001). But Taylor (2006) explores whether the distinction between three types of social capital (bonding, bridging and linking) may provide a useful way to frame children’s participation. Many children, in fact, may well have very strong bonding social capital within their own peer groups. Some groups may have fairly strong bridging social capital in terms of horizontal ties between peer groups at a quite localised level. But a clear ‘weakness’, in social capital terms, of children’s networks lies with linking social capital, the vertical ties between children and external actors. The range of children and young people’s participation activities organised by adults can be seen as concentrating on strengthening, splicing and multiplying such ties. These may be the new state institutions to support participation processes, that Gaventa (2004) recommends.

In her seminal article, Morrow (2001) reminds readers of a powerful alternative to Putnam’s social capital in Bourdieu’s own development of the concept. Without any guiding hand from the organisers, a number of seminar participants saw considerable potential in Bourdieu’s conceptualisation and his associated idea of ‘habitus’ (see Pinkney 2006 and papers published outwith this special issue, including Moncrieffe, 2007 and Thomas, 2007). Moncrieffe finds ‘habitus’ useful in connecting the social and the individual, as a mechanism to show how individuals gain and then apply socially derived categories of judgement. Habitus is not static but it does have ‘inbuilt inertia’ (quoting Wacquant, 2005). Habitus thus helps Moncrieffe analyse the enduring stigma and thus exclusion of certain children and young people from participative activities let alone basic services: namely, development agencies and

donors' exclusion of 'street children' and 'restavecs' in Haiti. Thomas finds habitus helpful, because Bourdieu recognised it as *embodied* history. The very arrangement of space and furniture, Thomas writes, contributes to children and young people's subordinate status. Bourdieu's ideas of social and cultural capital are useful in recognising that children and young people often have little of both, so that they are not taken seriously as political players. Enabling children and young people to build up such capital can be one of the aims of participative practice. Another aim can be changing the 'space and furniture' (see also Cornwall and Coehlo, 2007).

Understanding the role of adults and organisations

As participation activities have blossomed, the role of adults in promoting and supporting such activities is coming under the spotlight. In both international development and in the UK, employment opportunities are opening up for 'participation workers'. Across the UK, networks of such workers have been established. Non-governmental organisations have frequently taken on a key role in supporting children and young people's participation, sometimes funded through donors or commissioned by governments.

Ideas from community development present a number of options for conceptualising the 'participation worker', along with the potential tensions of this role. Taylor (2006) articulates a number of roles, from facilitator to co-conspirator. The most 'successful' community development worker may be the one we do not see. But this is a potential problem for workers placed low in hierarchical agencies, or for those working in non-governmental organisations dependent on external funding, where such invisibility may lead to such work being considered insignificant and eventually discontinued. Ideas of facilitation and capacity-building in fact can be patronising, as Taylor pointed out in the seminar discussion; instead, capacity-realising may better describe more emancipatory practice.

Larger organisations, Taylor suggested at the seminar (drawing on work by Craig and others), can provide "docking points" for smaller ones; adult organisations then can provide such docking points for children and young people's organisations. Thus children and young people can maintain the autonomy of their organisations while benefiting from the adult organisations' access to "invited spaces". But there are less benign ways to frame the relationships. These recognise that adult – and particularly non-governmental -- organisations gain from facilitating children's participation, such as funding streams, meeting performance indicators, enhanced media access, and

particularly relationships with policy-makers (Tisdall and Davis, 2004; Tisdall and Bell, 2006). This recognition does not necessarily diminish the present benefits of adult support for children and young people's participation. But it encourages us to take a reflexive look at adult organisational and individual practice, to recognise how power is practiced through these relationships as well as with the policy-makers who they seek to influence.

As yet, there are few organisations of children. Experiences in Brazil and India are particularly interesting because there are groups of children who have been organised and have had considerable policy and political profile for some time (see this issue, Butler and Rampal). But organisations of children are still exceptional. There is an irony that, if children's rights can be described as a 'new social movement' or a 'civil rights movement', it is currently still predominantly led by adults. The question is whether this is a transitional stage or a more permanent feature. If a transitional stage, there are arguably parallels with the disability movement. While not a story particularly told by disability advocates, the earlier arguments by professionals in rehabilitation for 'normalisation' and de-institutionalisation (e.g. Wolfensberger, 1972) did help to create openings and spaces for disabled people themselves to articulate their oppression and their own solutions. It may be that adult organisations are presently creating such spaces and, in due course, adults will become less prominent and children's own organisations will become the norm.

But others, such as Lansdown (2006), assert that adults will have continuing responsibilities in participation processes; she believes that sustained autonomous activity by children is in most instances not a realistic goal. Lansdown has developed ideas around children's 'evolving capacities', a phrase contained within Article 5 of the UNCRC, as a useful way of taking forward children's participation. There are affinities with Rampal's (this issue) use of 'scaffolding', taken from theorisation by Vygotsky. When one realises that children with certain experiences 'scaffold' other children, and children themselves are taking on positions as 'participation workers', this sharing of experience to enhance others' development in participation activities may be a useful component in analysing and promoting participation activities.

Conclusion

Ultimately, children and young people's participation can be seen as a broad umbrella that has been used to promote and support a growing range of activities. It

has served a vital role in establishing a place for children and young people's participation at the different scales of decision-making, from micro-scales within communities to the macro-scales of national or even international politics. But the single broad umbrella may need to be put away, replaced by more nuanced terms. This will reveal the tensions and possibilities of children and young people as 'public actors'. Conflict may be acknowledged, along with its creative possibilities. New alliances could be made, cutting across communities of interest or of geography, as children and young people's groups may align with others to advocate on their particular collective interests. It may require adult organisations and workers to be reflective and more critical of our own role in children and young people's participation 'work'.

This special issue suggests that challenging theories of children and young people's participation can assist in the above. New and revitalised ideas provide the potential for re-framing and new insights. While postmodernism would suggest the search for progressive enlightenment is illusory, there is no doubt that children and young people's participation activities are currently experiencing certain difficulties and tensions that new ideas can assist in articulating and reflecting upon.

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